'THE ABOMINABLE SNOWMAN'

By SWAMI PRANAVANANDA, F.R.G.S.

[*Swami Pranavananda, the author of this article, is a Hindu ascetic who has made peculiarly his own the region of Ngari Khorsum (Western Tibet), comprising the holy mountain of Kailas and the two lakes of Raksas and Manasarovar. I had the pleasure of meeting him at Thugolho gompa, on the southern shores of Manasarovar, in 1945 and passed a pleasant afternoon discussing his travels in these parts* (A.J. 55. 316).

Many other gurus *and religious devotees make the pilgrimage to Kailas; but Swami Pranavananda is exceptional in that, amidst his religious duties, he has found time to study the geography of his favourite region. In particular, he has been at pains to reassert the traditional sources of the four great rivers—Brahmaputra, Indus, Karnali and Sutlej —that rise in the locality of the two lakes, against certain views put forward by Sven Hedin. He raised the matter first in an article in the* Geographical Journal *in February 1939, and at greater length in his book* Exploration in Tibet.

Briefly, his claim is that when, as is often the case, several affluents or headstreams converge to form the traditional source from which a single river flows, one should accept this traditional location rather than try and place the source in one of the headstreams, since of the latter one may be more distant than the others, but the quantity of water it discharges may be less; or a stream that supplies most water at one time of the year may dry up at another time, whilst other headstreams run all the year round. Mr. Gurdial Singh found (A.J. 60. 268) *that the old bed of the Sutlej, leading from Raksas lake, was almost dry, whereas heavy rain or melting of snow may result in a rise in the level of Manasarovar lake, with a consequent flow of water into Raksas through the Ganga Chhu, resulting in a continuous flow of water in the old bed of the Sutlej* (G.J. xciii, 130). *Dr. Longstaff's verdict will command most people's assent: 'In general I am in full agreement . . . in accepting the traditional sources of the four rivers . . . It savours of impertinence for Europeans to assert their views against the usage of other civilizations'* (G.J. xciii, 134–5).

As will be seen in the following article, the Swami has not confined his interests solely to river sources, but he has taken an interest in the problem of the so-called Abominable Snowman. Though he can bring no direct witness of his own to the question, he has enquired of Tibetans he has met on his journeys and their testimony, for what it is worth, corroborates the view that the creature is a bear. Since, hitherto, reports on the Snowman have come mainly from the Indian side of the Himalayan frontier, it is useful to have information from Tibet.

At the close of the article, some notes have been added, on the subject of the particular bear that may be indicated; and on some points of

Tibetan etymology. Footnotes within square brackets, in the body of the article, are not by the author.—T. S. BLAKENEY.]

DURING the last ten years, sensational news and stories regarding the 'Abominable Snowman' have become a feature in the Press. A close examination of these articles, etc., shows there has hardly been a person who has seen one, or got, at reliable first-hand, knowledge of the same, devoid of legend or exaggeration. Added to this, confusion is worse confounded by the fact that different persons have translated differently—and sometimes mistranslated—the original Tibetan words designating or describing this animal, used by local population (Tibetan), who can be supposed to have a more intimate knowledge of this object than others. For example, the Tibetan expression 'mi-te' has been rendered as 'Abominable' by Lt.-Col. Howard Bury of the Everest reconnaissance party.[1] Really, however, the Tibetan word 'mi-te' connotes 'man-bear.' In August 1935, I heard of the 'mi-te' for the first time when I was at Thugolho gompa (monastery) situated on the southern shores of the sacred Lake Manasarovar, western Tibet, when I had gone there to select a place for my sojourn in Manas Region for twelve months.

A Tibetan dokpa (shepherd) pilgrim from Markham (eastern province of Tibet) was describing an incident when one of the sheep of his flock was attacked by a 'mi-te' at the Kyang Chhu (16,000 ft.), a tributary of the Tamchok Khambab (Brahmaputra). It was dusk-time when the dogs began to bark violently. The dokpas spotted an animal, which they thought to be a Changu (wolf) at first sight and immediately fired two shots at the beast with their matchlock guns (literally flint-locks). Both shots missed, the animal left the sheep bleeding and ran away. The shepherds saw the creature from a distance of about 100 cubits. The animal at first ran on all fours: after running for some distance it stood on its hind legs to look back at the place from which the shots came; seeing a number of men standing together, it disappeared into the upper portions of the valley. On its hind legs the animal was described as being the height of a man and light red or reddish-brown in colour. They called it 'mi-tre.'

Again, in the month of June 1937, I heard of the 'mi-te' for the second time, when I was camping at the traditional source of the Tamchok Khambab or Brahmaputra. A number of myakora (pilgrim) nomads, from Bongba and Amdo Province in Northern Tibet were camping on the banks of the Brahmaputra, four miles from the source. They had gone there to try their luck, if they could get a dong (wild yak), for a change in their meat. They were on their way to Lake Manasarovar and Kailas. During the course of a talk they told me that the source regions of Tamchok Khambab (Brahmaputra) and

[1] [C. K. Howard Bury, *Mount Everest: the Reconnaissance, 1921*, p. 141: The porters identified human-like tracks as those of "'The Wild Man of the Snows,' to which they gave the name of Metohkangmi, 'the abominable snow man.'"]

Kubi Tsangpo abound in wild yak (dong), Tibetan gazelle (goa), wild sheep (na and nyan), Tibetan antelope (cho) and lynx (yi). Incidentally, the nomads told me that they saw a 'mi-te' at the source region of the Kubi (17,000 ft.), one of the headstreams of the Brahmaputra. The 'mi-te' or red bear attempted to attack one of their sheep, while they were grazing on the slopes of a mountain in a deep valley but was scared away by a pack of watch-dogs, which began to bark fiercely at it. They further reported that the 'mi-te' is found at several places on the Tibetan side of Nepal border. This and the information gathered by me from other Tibetans go to show that the Tibetans know 'mi-te' to be the red bear—one of the three varieties of bear familiar to them.

In my book *Exploration in Tibet* (published by Calcutta University) and *Kailas—Manasarovar*, I made mention of three fauna of Kailas—Manas Regions (pages 111 and 69, respectively), black bear (tom), brown bear (te), and man bear (mi-te) (walks on hind legs like man).

In the word 'tre' the letter 'r' is so very lightly pronounced that it is almost inaudible. So, for all practical purposes I prefer to use the word as 'te' only. I have not seen the 'mi-te' myself, but collected this information from a number of local Tibetans and from shepherds and pilgrims going to this region from eastern and central Tibet, contiguous with the Himalayas. Since the sensational news of the Abominable Snowman became a prominent topic in the Press, in connection with almost all the Himalayan Expeditions, in the year 1950 I instructed some of my Tibetan friends in Manas Regions to collect first-hand information, offering a good present in cash, as a result of which I got the following information in July 1953. One 'mi-te' visited the Tomomopo Camp (15,000 ft.) on the Tag Tsangpo, on the south-eastern side of Manasarovar. In February 1953, a 'mi-te' passed by that way in the evening. The shepherds camping at Tomomopo witnessed, with great curiosity, the animal moving in the Tag valley, sometimes on all fours and sometimes on its two hind legs. At that part of the year the upper regions of the valleys and even the vast plains of the Tag Tsangpo are under snow. So, perhaps, the animal came down so near the shepherds' camps in search of food, either vegetarian or non-vegetarian. Perhaps, not finding an opportunity of snatching away any sheep, since the shepherds were all alert, it disappeared into the upper regions of the valley.

The following is the account given by my informant. The footprints of the 'mi-te' left on the hard ground, scantily covered by sand, measured 16 fingers or 11 ins. in length and 7 fingers or 5 ins. in breadth. The feet had five toes each and the hands (lhakpa) only four toes, or only four toes could be seen in the imprints. In Tibetan, the front legs of an animal are called lhakpa or hand and the hind ones kangba or legs. The toes were two fingers or $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. long; all the toes are almost of the same size, excepting the little toes which are shorter than the rest. The animal when on its hind legs was described as being a little taller than a tall man. The colour of the bear was deep

brown, as that of the ngaruserchung (Brahmani duck), though the shade varies from one part of the body to another. The body of the animal is covered with a thick coat of reddish-brown hair and the hairs on the face are pretty long. Ten years after, when the shepherds had gone up the valley for grazing their sheep, they marked the footprints of the ' mi-te ' on the snowfields to be a cubit (18 ins.) in length and corresponding width as well, with no traces of the toes whatsoever. This, obviously, was due to the melting of the snow at the edges of the imprints and the consequent enlargement of the whole.

It was also reported that the ' mi-te ' sometimes attacks the yak and even man, when found alone.

Shrubs, grass, moss, rhubarb, champa-estella (pang), small plants, and flowers are found growing on either side of glaciers beginning from the snout right to the head, after the winter snows melt away. As a matter of fact, I have seen vegetation right up to an altitude of 20,000 ft. or so. The question, therefore, does not arise as to what the ' mi-te ' or any other animal wandering in these regions may be after. I have actually seen wild horses and domesticated yaks digging snow with their hooves and pushing aside sufficiently big stones with their noses, to pick up grass and its roots.

It will be noted in this connection that the ' mi-te ' (red bear) like wild yak, kyang (Tibetan wild horses), lynx, snow leopard, wolf, ibex, bharal, ghural, Tibetan antelope, musk-deer, and other animals often make excursions far on to the snow fields and glacier both during winter, and other seasons, in search of food and sometimes for wandering's sake. So it is no wonder that the footprints and tracks of these or other animals are seen on snow and glaciers, freshly made or old and distorted. As a matter of fact, I had seen, during my winter sojourns in Tibet during the years 1935–7 and 1943–4, tracks of wild yaks, wolves, and other animals mentioned above for miles together. As recently as October 1, 1954, when there was a heavy snowfall on Manasarovar, domestic yaks from Ritjen Camp tracked on snow for seven miles to Shushup Tso in search of grass. Even in the Indian Himalayas, I saw the black bear wandering on snow, in winter, during my stay at Gangotri in 1934–5. Also the musk-deer and bharal were seen wandering leisurely and aimlessly on the vast expanse of snow round about the Gangotri temple in the middle of the day.

Since the ' mi-te ' walks sometimes on all fours and sometimes on hind legs only, it is but natural that the tracks of footprints are seen in double and sometimes in single file.

When the footprints are observed long after they have been exposed to sun, it is no wonder that, due to the melting of the snow along the edges, the marks become enlarged to a length of near about 18 ins. with corresponding width, in the case of the ' mi-te.' When I was crossing the Khandosanglam pass, in 1941, I came across giant footprints as long as 21 ins. Khandosanglam is a pass east of Kailas peak, which according to Tibetan traditions could be negotiated only by those pious pilgrims who have completed twelve circumambulations of

the Holy Kailas peak by the regular parikrama route. Hence, barely one or two pilgrims in a year negotiate this pass. My guide from Diraphuk gompa (second monastery of Kailas) informed me that a lama from Kham had crossed the pass some twenty-five days before we did. The glacier was about a mile long and was full of deceptive crevasses. The footprints left by my predecessor, the lama, on the deep snow melted away a good deal along the edges by the warm sun of July, with the result that a trail of footprints, each 21 ins. long, with corresponding width was before us when we were crossing the pass. A credulous pilgrim might easily have described the footprints as those of a great Himalayan Yogi, a thousand years old, or as those of Asvatthama, or Hanuman (one of the seven immortal chirajivis) of the Mahabharata fame ; they might equally have been described by some Himalayan Expedition party as those of an Abominable Snowman.

I may recall in this connection that Col. A. Waddell was the first Westerner to mark the footprints of the ' mi-te ' in 1899, in the north-east of Sikkim.[2] Later, members of different Himalayan expeditions also noted similar footprints at heights ranging from 10,000 to 21,000 ft. above the sea level, in the Kealoram ranges, Salween valley in Burma, Kulu valley, Garhwal, Nepal, Sikkim, Chumbi valley, Bhutan and Assam, etc., and a few others in regions contiguous with Bhutan, Sikkim and east of Nepal on the Tibetan side. Much of the information regarding the origin of the footprints was, however, not first-hand, having been based on hearsay, which was a mixture of myth, superstition, and imagination.

Let us now closely examine the real meaning of the Tibetan words used for the so-called Abominable Snowman. The following table indicates the different ways in which the expression and words are translated by members of expeditions :

mi-te	abominable, filthy, disgusting to a repulsive degree, dirty.
miteh-kangmi . .	abominable snowman.
mih-teh . . .	teh *par excellence* of the Sherpas.
me-te	man-bear.
mih	man.
yeh-teh . . .	rocky-area animal ; animal which lives in a rocky area.

[2] [L. A. Waddell, *Among the Himalayas* (1899), p. 223. Actually, Sir Joseph Hooker in 1849 (*Himalayan Journals*, 1905 ed., p. 298) had recorded the presence of a race of wildmen called ' Harrum-mo ' in the Lhonak valley, south-east of Kangchenjunga, but he clearly regards them as human, and suggests they may be the Chepangs, a primitive race already noted by Hodgson in the Bengal Asiatic Society's *Journal*, 1848.]

W. W. Rockhill, *Explorations in Mongolia and Tibet* (Smithsonian Report, 1892), p. 669, refers to wild men in Mongolia and (p. 670, note) to others said to live on the lower Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in Tibet. It appears that he regards them as human, however, whilst it is equally clear that Waddell is thinking of bears, and he quotes them by name as ' the great yellow snow-bear (*Ursus isabellinus*).']

yeti	mi-te.
yite	mi-te.
kangmi . . .	snowman.
gangmi . . .	snowman.
mi-go	wild man.
mi-do	which goes like man ; dangerous to man ; man-bear.
mi-chempo . . .	big man.
mi-bompo . . .	strong man.
dzu-teh . . .	livestock animal ; animal which is dangerous to livestock ; red bear.
chhu-mung . . .	water goblin.
lho-mung . . .	mountain goblin.

The following are the correct meaning of the corresponding terms :

mi mih me meh }	man.
te teh tre }	bear.
kang gang }	snow.
mi-gve mi-go . . .	Beast that walks like man ; these terms are used for snowman (bear-man in Amdo and Kham province of Tibet (now China) ; these terms are also used by users of Tibetan on the Indian border adjoining the province of Kham.
yeh-da yih-da yeh-te . . . . yi-te	These terms are used for a mythological being with a throat as thin as a needle and a stomach as big as a mountain. Hence, the use of these terms for mi-te also, since they believe it, due to ignorance of facts, to be a dreaded creature.
tu-do thu-do dhu-dho } . . .	A general term for a beast or a four-legged creature.
hlo-mung tho-mung } . . .	wild witch or goblin.

chu-mung . . . { Snow (lit. water) goblin ; since many have not actually seen the mi-te or man-bear, and since they consider the same to be a fearful dreaded being connected with witchcraft, they wrongly call the 'mi-te' or red bear, 'tho-mung' or 'chu-mung.'

As a matter of fact, Tibetan words are pronounced with a wide range of sound, sometimes beyond recognition ; *t* is pronounced as *th*, *d*, and *dh* ; *k* is pronounced as *kh* ; *g* as *gh*.

It may be mentioned in this connection that these exaggerated stories are heard of mostly on the Indian and not on the Tibetan side. Very likely the first mistranslation made by Henry Newman,[3] in 1921, of the word 'meteh' (in meteh Kangmi) as 'filthy, dirty, disgusting to a repulsive degree, hence abominable' might be responsible for the misconception which has prevailed ever since and misled many into repeating and perpetuating the mistake. Also, the fact that the matter was not investigated thoroughly on the Tibetan side, where the local population claim knowledge of the animal, and several who have been eye-witnesses, identify it with the red bear, has helped the perpetuation of the wrong notion.

The terminology given above boils down to two expressions, 'mi-te' and 'Kangmi,' which respectively mean 'man-bear' and 'snow-man.' These two connote the same object and they are the alternative terms used for the same animal, just as people call the orang-outang 'banamanas' or wild man.

On this score the so-called 'Abominable Snowman' is no other than the red bear of the Himalayas, the colour of the animal varying from light brown to reddish-brown. The evidence from all sides points to this conclusion. All exaggerations and fantastic stories and legends, believed or woven in this regard, must be set at rest.

It is just possible that the 'te' (brown bear) and the 'mi-te' (man-bear or red bear) might be identical ; or it may be that these two are confounded one for the other by Tibetans on the Indian side of the Himalayas ; and that it is the footprints of these animals that have been puzzling the brains of so many expeditions.

I have also got a report, not so far confirmed by a first-hand informant, that the 'te' and the 'mi-te' both go into hibernation under rocks, protected from wind, or in a cave, from the middle of November

[3] [For Henry Newman, see Tilman, *Mount Everest 1938*, p. 127. Tilman gathered together a number of references to the Abominable Snowman, but it may be noted that whereas he quotes F. S. Smythe, in 1937, as having had his prints of footmarks identified as *Ursus arctus pruinosus* (see *The Times*, November 10, 1937), Smythe, in *A.J.* 50. 65, as also in *The Valley of Flowers*, p. 142, gives the name correctly as *Ursus arctos isabellinus*, which agrees with Scott Russell, *Mountain Prospect*, p. 196 (except that the latter uses an incorrect spelling '*arctus*'), and is confirmed by Sir Gavin de Beer (below, note B). E. Wyss-Dunant, of the Swiss Everest Expedition, 1952, also agrees (*G.J.* cxix, pp. 266–8).]

or December to the end of February; after hibernation, they sometimes dig in the snow in search of grass and roots, and they sometimes make excursions on avalanches, in spring, for excavating the bodies of bharal, blue sheep, and gazelle, killed and buried under avalanches. I mention this here, as it may throw some light on the occurrence of the footprints of the 'mi-te' in snow at high altitudes.

So far as my knowledge goes, the langur or the black-faced monkey of the Himalayas has never been seen wandering on snow, as it is seldom or never seen above the tree-line. Indeed, most of the langurs in the upper Himalayas are seen getting down to warmer regions long before the snowfalls. So the footprints observed on the snows, by some Himalayan Expeditions, could not be those of langurs.

I shall feel happy if this my note provides a clue for giving a death-blow to the 'Abominable Snowman' theory and controversy.

NOTES

(A.) Mr. H. E. Richardson, the last British-born Trade Agent and Officer-in-Charge of the Mission to Lhasa, and author of some standard works on the Tibetan language, has kindly sent us the following note on the Tibetan words used in the foregoing article:

'The Swami's discussion of Tibetan words lacks that essential for complete understanding—a transcription of the Tibetan spelling. Also, it is not clear from what sources he derives his information. His findings, therefore, should be treated as opinion rather than authority; and some of the opinions are not convincing.

'The usual word in Lhasa for the "Abominable Snowman" is *mi-gö* (spelt mi rgod), meaning "wild man." *Mi-go* certainly does not mean "beast that walks like a man," nor is the word *mi-'gro* (pronounced mi dro), with which the Swami appears to confuse it, commonly used with that meaning. *Mi-gve* does not look like a Tibetan word at all.

'The colloquial word for the red (or grey) bear is *dred-mo* (pronounced tre-mo). *Mi-tre* (spelt mi dred) or *mi-te*, as the Swami prefers to render it, is known but not common in Lhasa and means "man-eating bear" rather than "man-like bear." The word *kang-mi* (spelt gangs-mi), to mean "snowman" is not used and I suspect it is the invention of some European with a smattering of Tibetan.

'I think the Swami is wide of the mark when he relates the "tantalised ghosts"—for whom the name is *Yi-dvags* (pronounced Yi-ta)—with the word *Ye-ti*. The latter seems to be the favourite Sherpa name for the Abominable Snowman; it is not used in Lhasa and does not seem to be Tibetan. A friend from Nepal tells me it is Nepalese and is derived from Sanskrit.

'*Hlo-*, *tho-*, and *chu-mung* seem to be connected with the Tibetan *rmu* or *dmu* (pronounced mu, not mung,) meaning a sort of goblin. A Tibetan friend confirms that the *chu-rmu* (or *-dmu*) is a water-kelpie. He did not know the other two words.'

(B.) Sir Gavin de Beer, Director of the Natural History Museum, in answer to an enquiry concerning the identification of the bear described by Swami Pranavananda, writes:—

'Assuming that the animal described *is* a bear, it would be the Red Bear: *Ursus arctos* (variety *isabellinus*, Horsfield (1826), *Trans. Linn. Soc. Lond., Zool.*, 15:334), which is found in the Himalayas. Tracks alleged to be those of the "Abominable Snowman" have been identified as those of this bear. . . . We have no doubt here that footmarks seen and attributed to the Abominable Snowman were made by different animals, including the Langur and the Red Bear.'